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The Return of Death in Times of Uncertainty—A Sketchy Diagnosis of Death in the Contemporary 'Corona Crisis'

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Abstract: For most parts of human history, death was an integral part of life, something that prehistoric and premodern man had no other option than to live with as best as possible. According to historians, death was familiar and tamed, it was at the center of social and cultural life. With the coming of modern secular society, death was increasingly sequestrated and tabooed, moved to the outskirts of society, made invisible and forbidden. Death became a stranger, and the prevalent attitude towards death was that of alienation. At the threshold of the 21st century, the topic of death again began to attract attention, becoming part of a revived death attitude described as 'Spectacular Death'. In the article, the authors diagnose, analyze, and discuss the impact of the return of death during the current 'Corona Crisis', arguing that despite the fact that the concern with death is at the very core of the management of the crisis, death as such remains largely invisible. In order to provide such a diagnosis of the times, the authors initially revisit the prevailing death attitudes in the Western world from the Middle Ages to the present day.

Keywords: death; history of death; modernity; omnipresent death; death disappeared; spectacular death; Corona Crisis

1. Introduction

Death is a natural and normal occurrence—it is indiscriminate of individual differences (hence it is called 'The Great Equalizer'), making sure no one escapes. It is a prerequisite for life, a functional necessity for old life giving way to new life. Without death, societies would be overcrowded with the old and feeble, inertia would prevail, and everything would come to a halt. The enormous human discharge of energy every day is largely attributed to the fact that we shall all die. In this way, death is a positive contribution to securing the continued vitality of the population and in the end ensuring the survival of the species.

Yet, we do not seem to be very pleased with the prospect of death. To us, the living, death is mostly regarded as something negative, a necessary evil, but evil, nonetheless. If we could, we would wish it away, abolish it, and make sure that it would not—like for all the generations gone before us—end up taking the lives of ourselves and all those whom we love. Throughout human history, death has been an ever-present foe to be fought with all the available means. Human ingenuity in this area has been quite extraordinary. All cultures, and with them also all religions, belief systems, and ideologies, can in the last instance be regarded as bulwarks and strategies intended to fend off our fear of death (Bauman 1992a; Becker 1997; Berger 1973). All the promises of eternal life, all the earthly sweat and toil—jobs, procreation, family life, love, mortgages, promotions, politics—as well as all the fun, distraction, consumption, and entertainment in the world can, ultimately, be construed as ingenious ways to make life livable and meaningful in the face of death. We are constantly kept busy in order to avoid

thinking about death. As Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman once stated about our slumbering awareness of our own mortality: 'In truth, our rather brief time *is* ticking away, but we seem only to hold our breath for seconds and minutes of it' (Goffman 1967, p. 261). Any deeper contemplation of the inevitability and annihilative force of death only rarely enters into our heavily fortified inner citadels. In this way, every day is just another day at the office when we are *still* alive, albeit always until further notice. Death is, as Belgian playwright Maeterlinck (Maeterlinck 2015, pp. 4–5) once mused, thus the most important thing in life, although we hardly recognize it as such. However, death *in itself*—for who has ever died and returned to report from the other side (besides those cases, credible or not, reported as 'near-death experiences')—is perhaps not even the worst enemy, but rather the gnawing *knowledge of death*, the fact that we will have to live our lives knowing that we will and must die. We do not only know that we must die, we also know that we know it (Bauman 1992a, p. 12). This knowledge of mortality has been the wellspring of a multitude of suspensions, disbeliefs, denials, taboos, euphemisms, and circumscriptions of death. However, for most of human history, we have had to live with this knowledge as nothing could be really done about death—it could not be hidden away, it could not be postponed, and any hope for immortality rested almost exclusively on beliefs in life *after* death (even though one will also find references to more earthly pathways to immortality—for example in the ancient Gilgamesh Epic through a prickly plant that would help retrieve one's lost youth) (for different forms of immortality throughout human history, see, e.g., Toynbee 1980; Jacobsen 2017). However, with the coming of modern society and modern medicine, death increasingly became an enemy to be fought from all flanks—death became the arch enemy of life. Danish 19th century theologian N.F.S. Grundtvig even called death 'the last enemy'. Death, as we shall see later, became the object of an intense and industrious search for vaccines, medical treatments, and surgical techniques intended to do away with it. However, despite such strenuous efforts, death was and remained unmoved. It reigned supreme.

Although French sociologist Latour (1991) once claimed that we were never modern, nowadays we live in an age regarded by most sociologists as either a late stage of modern society (labelled respectively 'late modernity' or 'reflexive modernity'), after the end of modernity ('postmodernity' or 'liquid modernity'), or in a new time and age requiring an entirely new vocabulary and new ways of living life and understanding it. Sociology—as a child of modernity—finds it almost impossible to escape its modern ancestry and with it also the urge to create a coherent and linear storyline of history that somehow culminates with the modern. However, if we are about to leave—or perhaps already have left—modernity behind, how may we then understand the present and its relationship to death? Sociology has probably always been concerned with diagnosing the present and trying to invent a vocabulary capable of capturing and not least criticizing contemporaneity (Rasborg 2003). With our specific interest in death, our professional embedding within the realm of sociology, and our location within a contemporary Western socio-cultural context, we are not immune to this almost incessant drive to understand where we are now standing in the long and winded history of humanity and in its relationship to death. There are doubtlessly many different ways of doing such a diagnosis of the times (*Zeitdiagnose* in German), but basically it means that one is searching for fragments of signs, trends and tendencies and trying to piece them together so that they may provide a more comprehensive view of the way we deal with and understand death today. Many diagnoses of the times appear to be concerned merely with the present state of modernity. However, in order to understand our present and avoid what German sociologist Elias (1987) once labelled 'sociologists' retreat to the present', one needs also to look back in time (to premodern times) in order to compare them with the present. The present only makes sense if seen as a continuation of or breach from the past.

In this article, we will provide an attempt at understanding the impact of the return of death in contemporary society as inaugurated by the current so-called 'Corona Crisis'. In order to do so, we will need to go back and look at how death was experienced and handled in earlier times. In the following, we will thus first discuss what death means to individuals and society in general. Then we move on to an admittedly compact recapitulation of the history of death in a Western context from

the Middle Ages to modern society. This leads us on to a conceptualization of our present attitude towards death as an age of 'Spectacular Death', and we present some of the main features of this recent death attitude. Based on this diagnosis of death in our time, we move on to discussing the arrival and impact of the 'Corona Crisis' on contemporary death attitudes with the aspiration of providing some insights into what death means now.

2. Death in Human and Social Life

Death is one of the very few certainties of life. It is at the very core of human life. Although death in our common-sense understanding is the opposite of life, it is actually constitutive of life by defining and delimiting it. Our lives are, as German philosopher Heidegger (Heidegger 1962) once would have it, therefore always being lived 'towards death'. Death is the endpoint of life, but also the resolution and culmination of everything (all the life) that went before it. The moment of death is in itself perhaps not important, but so is the fact that we always—albeit most often unknowingly—plan, organize, and live our lives in the shadow of the inevitable ending of life (Simmel 2007, p. 74). Death is thus something that individuals, communities, and societies must necessarily—however reluctantly—deal with in order to make life with death more meaningful. Compared to the normally smooth running of everyday life, dearth is rupture, deviance, and disaster. Death cannot be wished away and most often—and perhaps particularly in modern times when death to most has become a marginal situation—it requires some sort of crisis management whenever it occurs (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Despite this fact, we seem in contemporary society (as opposed to traditional societies) to live our lives as if death is not really a part of it. We are brought up in times in which everything seems to be constantly reinvented, recycled, and rehearsed without any real or definitive ending. As Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman once observed, there is now no finality, no durability, no permanence—only transience and endless repetition (Bauman 1992a, p. 175). However, just as all television programs must eventually stop, just as all football games will end when the referee blows the final whistle (perhaps after some additional time), just as summer's blossom is always followed by autumn's leaf fall, so life will eventually also end. This realization that human life is simply a mortal endeavor, however, is almost unfathomable to humans—and often clouded by individual or collective fantasies of symbolic immortality (Lifton 1973). We are, quite likely, the only creatures on this earth that not only know deep down that we must die, but also the only ones capable of suspending this knowledge and living as if we might somehow escape our destiny.

According to Danish theologian Bjerg (1975), it is useful to distinguish between 'death in itself' and 'thoughts' about death. The former (the unchanging and historyless death that eventually comes to us all in one form or other) we have no access to as it is located beyond the limits of direct and recollectable human experience, whereas the latter is something we can elaborate on, share, and discuss with others. According to French phenomenological philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch in *La mort* (Jankélévitch 2017), we should primarily think of death as something mysterious. In order to get a firm grip on this, however, we must distinguish between different forms and experiences of death—which he refers to as the three person's perspective. This prism, he suggests, enables us to understand death and show that 'death' is not just one and the same thing. First, according to him, there is 'the death of a person unfamiliar to me', which even though it may relate to the death of a remote, entirely unknown, and anonymous person nevertheless still causes reflections of death. Second, there is 'the death of a person familiar to me', which is experienced as a personal and painful loss of someone loved. This kind of death moves us because it ends relationships near and dear to our lives. Third, there is 'my death', which is the death that concerns the first person him/herself and which we can contemplate and mentally prepare for well before it happens—not least sparked by witnessing the deaths of others. It is a death we carry with us until we die (Jankélévitch 2017, pp. 44–59). It is Jankélévitch's point that all three instances of death—although different—makes us realize that we are mortal beings capable of reflecting on mortality. We only experience our own death once (according to Jankélévitch, we do in fact not really experience it because, in typical Epicurean manner, when our own death occurs, we are

no longer there), whereas throughout life we experience the two other forms more or less frequently. In Jankélévitch (1994, p. 83) view, even though death is integral to life, death is not a 'necessity'. Rather, it is a condition that we have to live with, but we are, in his words, capable of 'economizing' with death by dealing with it and postponing it through medical intervention, socio-political measures, and so on. Death *is* there—but we *can* always try to do something about it.

Of Jankélévitch's three aforementioned experiences of death, it is perhaps particularly our own death that seems utterly incomprehensible (and which we so desperately try to postpone) for how can this pulsating body and this active mind that is currently contemplating matters of life and death itself die, be annihilated, disappear? Although the experience of other people's death (particularly of a loved one) may be painful, the threat of our own extinction, the ceasing of our very existence and non-being is most unimaginable. Hence, it must be denied. According to American cultural analyst Becker (Becker 1997) in his Pulitzer-winning thesis on our cultural death denial, death is to man something that needs to be dealt with through a number of different strategies primarily concerned with denying death as the final destiny of man. As Becker stated: 'The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that this is the final destiny for man' (Becker 1997, p. xvii). Human mortality, 'death', is an awfully big enemy to take on, so instead we try in a number of more targeted ways to fight death and make life with death livable, thereby reducing the terror and fear associated with it. Or, as Bauman (1992a)—who in many respects followed this line of reasoning—suggested, instead of confronting 'death' as such, particularly in modern times, fighting the many different 'causes of death' constitutes the very meaning and purpose of life. This is not something individuals do all by themselves, but something that is inscribed in collective belief systems and schemes for action. In this way, Bauman claims, understanding the way societies and cultures deal with death provides an important gateway into understanding these societies and cultures in themselves. Death is the ultimate problem that they need to address, manage, and process. Death is thus a social/cultural problem as well as a human problem—something to be solved only by the living. As Elias once wittily commented: 'Death is the problem of the living. Dead people have no problems. Of the many creatures on this earth that die, it is human beings alone for whom dying is a problem' (Elias 2001, p. 3). The way, however, that individuals and collectivities (such as societies and cultures) deal with death differs tremendously—historically and comparatively. It changes throughout time, just as it diverges considerably from one culture to another.

Thus, death does not stand still. Although our relationship to death changes only slowly and almost undetectably, there are always movements and developments in the way humanity deals with death. This goes for our individual thoughts about and experiences with death that change throughout our lifespans. However, it also goes for our collective attitudes toward and schemes of action directed against death. In our individual lives, our attitude towards death changes with experience and maturation. Death becomes more real, more tangible, and more relevant to our own lives as we grow older and encounter other people's deaths. However, also on a cultural and societal level does death undergo transformations caused by changes in the way we live our lives and organize societies—due to developments in demography, science, technology, economy, values, norms, politics, beliefs, and ways of cohabitation.

In many ways, death is built into our social structure and thus mirrors some of the central components of this structure. For example, in modern society, death primarily targets the old, whereas only a century or two ago, death often found its victims among infants and the young. One consequence of this demographic development has been that we now live much longer, but also that the way we regard old age has changed. In modern society, the old are no longer socially useful and are thus gradually and almost invisibly removed from public duties and into retirement with its many pleasures but also its potentials for loneliness, isolation, and devaluation (what is sometimes called 'social death'). Gerontophobia and ageism are thus characteristic traits of our youth-obsessed culture—a culture often finding old age problematic, unpleasant, and unwanted (Wright 2008). There is therefore a close

connection between demographic changes and fluctuations in structures and values when it comes to understanding our relationship to death (see, e.g., Blauner 1966; Riley 1983). Consequently, nowadays the hierarchies of death and grief are different from what was the case a century or two ago. In those days, infant and child mortality rates were high and losing a child before the teenage years was not all that uncommon (Berridge 2002, p. 19). Contrariwise, in contemporary society, the loss of a child is an extraordinary event that is generally regarded as constituting the emotional apex of the 'hierarchy of loss' (Robson and Walter 2012–2013). In this way, death—the reality and experience of it—is no longer what it used to be.

Because death in itself is such an unshakable fact of life, all cultures must necessarily at one and the same time perform a double task. On the one hand, they must accept that death is the ultimate destiny for all their members, but, on the other hand, they must also deny that death reigns sovereign over life and that nothing can be done about it (Dumont and Foss 1972). This double task keeps all cultures and societies going, admitting death its rightful place whilst simultaneously trying to push it aside. It is this jostle between living with death and doing everything to avoid it that has formed—and continues to form—the very foundation for historical changes in our death attitudes.

3. Omnipresent Death

Despite the fact that death has always been there, it is not historyless. Death—'in itself' and 'our thoughts about it' as mentioned by Bjerg above—has many histories. Some of them tell us about how death has not changed significantly, being the same old biological fact of life as it always was, others of rapid ruptures, revivals, and reversals in death attitudes, yet others of how our culture has slowly moved away from a presumed naturalness and calm acceptance of death among our ancestors towards a more alienated attitude. There is thus not *one* history of death in the singular. Despite the plurality of histories, a common leitmotif in most scholarly work on the historical transformations and transmutations of death in the Western world has been—albeit from different positions, with different emphases and different agendas—that the presence and impact of death has increasingly been minimized and marginalized with the coming of modern society (see, e.g., Harrison 2005; Illich 1976; Morin 1951; Tamm 1992; Vovelle 1983). One of the most cited, used, and also criticized contributions to the understanding of the transformation of our death attitudes is the work of French historian Philippe Ariès. In several important pieces of work from the late 1960s until the early 1980s, Ariès digested, documented, and dissected how Western societies—in a diachronic and synchronic perspective—had dealt with death. *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Ariès 1974a) and *The Hour of Our Death* (Ariès 1981) provided an important platform for conceptualizing and framing changing death attitudes or 'death mentalities' as Ariès called them. Below, we will draw on some of the main insights from these volumes and combine these with other relevant sources in order to describe premodern and modern understandings of and experiences with death.

It is difficult, if not downright impossible, to capture an extended period of time's relationship to death (or to life for that matter) with just a few catchy phrases or powerful epithets. On the other hand, this is neither the time nor the place for an extended history lesson. Ariès started his history writing with the Middle Ages, not least because they, according to him, constituted a diametrical opposition to the way the 20th century (from which he was writing) handled death. Obviously, people also died during other prehistorical times—the Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, and so on—and we have recorded evidence of some of their death-related rituals and practices (see, e.g., Laqueur 2015; Seebach and Willerslev 2018). Other scholars have moved much further back into the prehistory of human civilization in order to excavate ancient mortuary rituals and death-related beliefs preceding the times describe by Ariès (see, e.g., Kellehear 2007; Kerrigan 2007). However, by specifically selecting medieval times as his starting point, Ariès also chose a time when cities of a significant size started to be formed, when states were established, and when trade and commerce (and with it, ideas and technologies) began to spread across borders.

Ariès named the medieval way of death 'Tamed Death'. By using this specific label, he suggested that even though death was undoubtedly feared (it was not *tame* but *tamed*), painful, and omnipresent, people nevertheless managed to take the sting out of death and get on with their lives, albeit in the constant shadow of death. This was a time when death was everywhere and touched everyone—it could be seen, smelled, and heard by villagers, peasants, knights, and kings alike. Death was in the midst of life. We need to remember that this was the time of 'The Black Death', the pest plague that ravaged throughout Europe and in a few years killed close to one-third of the entire population. Besides this, wars, famines, poor sanitary conditions, and diseases with no effective cure made earthly life short (on average 30 years) and obtaining heavenly afterlife the purpose of a lot of daily activity. Preferably, death should be forewarned and prepared in order to secure a safe passage to the other side. Death—and with it, thoughts of death—was omnipresent, often shrouded in metaphysical or religious interpretations and representations, but nevertheless always something experienced directly in everyday life. To medieval men and women, Ariès states, 'death was both familiar and near, evoking no great fear or awe' (Ariès 1974a, p. 13). There simply was no escape from death. It was part and parcel of life in the local community—everyone knew someone who had recently died, and people who died were known to most of those who would be present by the deathbed. Death thus marked the loss of a member of the community. According to Ariès, medieval death was simultaneously a simple thing and a public event that required the right proceedings but no theatrics. 'Death was a ritual moment', Ariès (1974a, p. 9) wrote, stressing that it was also a religious moment that entailed lamentations, prayers, ointments, and elaborate mourning rites.

In his work, Ariès showed that 'Tamed Death' was one in which there was a constant 'coexistence of the living and the dead' (Ariès 1974a, p. 14). This co-existence was as much symbolic as actual. There are thus many cultural and artistic artefacts from this medieval period portraying the reciprocal relationship and symbolic exchange between the living and the dead. For example, classic themes from the *ars moriendi* of the time such as 'The Dance of the Dead', 'The Triumph of Death' or 'Death and the Maiden' were invented and started to spread during medieval times (see Rollo-Koster 2016). Particularly the many images of 'The Dance of the Dead' symbolized the symbiotic relationship between the living and the dead and also illustrated the physical proximity between the two worlds (see Kiss and Pribyl 2019). Common to these artistic themes was the insistence that death is an integral part of life and that no one escapes it. Numerous were the illustrations and mentions of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory, informing watchers, listeners, and readers that they must remember death at all times—*memento mori*. Although such iconographies, images, and stories were not readily available to the most ordinary people—being the possession of members of the societal elite—on church walls and in sermons, the congregation would be made familiar with the imminence of death and made aware that preparation for it was of utmost importance.

Later on, according to Ariès, due to the speeding up of the processes of individualization, secularization, and urbanization, the advancement of medicine and technology, changes in demographics, religious orientations, values, and practices, new understandings of self and others (e.g., of the family) began to develop, thus paving the way for new death mentalities called, respectively, 'Death of One's Own' (the Renaissance and Enlightenment period) and 'Thy Death' (the 19th century Romantic period). Each of these phases marked important stepping stones towards the modern way of death as we have come to know it—a way of death that made 'the traditional attitude toward death appear inert and static' (Ariès 1974a, p. 13).

4. Death Disappeared

According to Ariès and many other scholars concerned with deciphering and organizing the turbulent history of death, the 20th century marked a landslide in our Western understanding and management of death. Two world wars with millions of casualties, a Cold War and the ability to produce mass-destruction bombs that can instantly annihilate big cities, famines, international terrorism, AIDS epidemics, several other epidemics, school shootings, and local wars, all coupled with a dramatic

rise in the average life expectancy and the curability of many previously incurable diseases—the 20th century was indeed, in British historian Hobsbawm (1994) apt expression, an 'age of extremes' and a time when the reality of death changed considerably. The majority of people were now born in hospitals and ended up dying there. Professions took over from family and local community when death was near. The first-hand experience with death—so familiar to our ancestors—was delayed in life, the previous parental socialization of children to the reality of death became unfashionable (almost regarded as cruel,) and childhood to most thus became a period of life without the knowledge of death. Perhaps the best way to summarize modern society's relationship to death would be estranged. According to Ariès, the death attitude began to change significantly—first slowly, then more rapidly—from the mid-19th century onwards culminating in the 20th century as the age of 'Forbidden Death':

> [T]he attitude toward death changed, but so slowly that contemporaries did not even notice. In our day, in approximately a third of a century, we have witnessed a brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings, a revolution so brutal that social observers have not failed to be struck by it. It is really an absolutely unheard-of phenomenon. Death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear. It would become shameful and forbidden (Ariès 1974a, p. 85).

The 20th century was also the time when the mentioning of the topic of death became embarrassing, a breach of social convention, a sign of bad manners, something to be avoided at all costs. It was also a century that in Ariès' view marked a reversal of traditional death attitudes—not least due to the impact of humanism, individualism, and 19th-century romanticism. This reversal meant that death became medicalized, mourning was privatized and banned from public life, and previously elaborate death and mourning rituals were instead reduced to a bare minimum (Ariès 1974b). This reversal process also gave rise to the so-called 'pornography of death' of which British anthropologist Gorer (1955) wrote in the mid-20th century—a pornography that exactly expressed the deep-seated cultural ambivalence towards death. On the one hand, death—like copulation and birth—was seen as something repugnant, disgusting, and socially unmentionable. On the other hand, however, death—or rather fictional death—was exciting, transgressive, and mesmerizing, especially because the acquaintance and familiarity with real death was so rapidly decreasing. Fictional death (in movies, novels, and the media) thus became a surrogate for experiencing real death and served as an important safety valve for the increasingly repressed thoughts and feelings about human mortality.

Initially, Ariès characterized the prevalent death attitude of the 20th century as 'Forbidden Death' (Ariès 1974a), because death was regarded as an affront to the values and self-perception of modern society, but later he preferred the notion of 'Invisible Death' (Ariès 1981). Either way, forbidden and/or invisible, death was—either by decree or as a consequence of its gradual removal from public sight—something that was not to be embraced or exposed. The symbiotic co-existence between the living and the dead of medieval times was now replaced by distance and aversion. Death was incompatible with modern society, modern medicine, the modern way of life, and with all its promises and beliefs in its own superiority. Death—and not least the failure to defeat it—was seen as a 'scandal of reason' and an insult to the rationality of modern science trying to control every single aspect of human and social life (Bauman 1992a, p. 5). In such a society, everything that was technologically possible would eventually be tried and tested (Ellul 1964), which was also the case in the incessant fight against death. Whereas traditional societies had always allowed death to play a significant role in the organization of social life, modern society instead chose sequestration and denial as the main strategies (see, e.g., Mellor and Shilling 1993). Everything associated with death such as old age, sickness, and bodily deterioration was regarded as deviations from the most prized possessions of life. Moreover, death was seen as a threat to the illusion of happiness as it revealed that happiness was shallow and always until further notice. An absurd illusion of immortality was rather entertained to go hand in hand with the illusion of endless happiness. As Ariès thus contended about the inhabitants of modern society, 'at heart we feel we are non-mortals' (Ariès 1974a, p. 106). This illusion of immortality made it tolerable to live with death and not least with the unpleasant knowledge of it.

Actually, death had not disappeared, nor had it become invisible as Ariès with his terminology suggested. During the time of 'Forbidden Death' there were obviously deaths, sometimes even cascades of it, such as during the world wars but also due to pandemics killing people by the millions. Think of The Spanish Flu, Cholera, or AIDS responsible for so many human casualties throughout the 20th century. Death was also in a roundabout way present through its absence—in the multitude of technologies and medicines intended to do away with it. Even though death had been a concern for trained doctors, specialists, and quacks for many centuries, death in modern society has become thoroughly medicalized (Walter 1994). The costs of healthcare—intended to treat and cure people and to extend their already advanced life expectancies—are constantly rising as are also the investments in new medical breakthroughs buttressing our illusion of immortality. As Croatian-Austrian philosopher Illich (1976) showed in his relentless critique of the so-called 'iatrogenic' consequences of this medicalization, 'natural death' disappears and is substituted with a view of death as a pathology, something preventable, something that could and should have been avoided, something deviant (Edgley 2003). Modernity's main responses to death were thus to deny it, suppress it, taboo it, medicalize it, professionalize it, institutionalize it, ostracize it, and trying to kill it (Bauman 1992a, p. 152). The outcome of this development, as Ariès observed, was that death was regarded as something negative and completely incompatible with modern life:

> [I]n the last third of the twentieth century something of monumental significance is taking place of which we are just becoming aware: death, that familiar companion of yore, has disappeared from our language. His name is anathema. A kind of vague and anonymous anxiety has taken the place of the words and symbols elaborated by our ancestors . . . [Death] no longer has any positive meaning at all. It is merely the negative side of what we really see, what we really know, and what we really feel (Ariès 1974a, p. 18).

Modern forbidden/invisible death to Ariès was thus seen as a purely negative phenomenon characterized by alienation, de-familiarization, and distance. The relative naturalness and calmness surrounding death had evaporated, leaving only fear and discomfort in its place—in Ariès' view, not least due to the secularization of society. Although this description of modern death perhaps comes pretty close to caricature, we need to emphasize that Ariès was a romantic historian and a medieval nostalgic who believed that something important was lost on the road from 'Tamed Death' to 'Forbidden/Invisible Death'. It is also important to stress that his undying testimony of death attitudes ended with his own death in 1984 and thus with 'Forbidden/Invisible Death' as the standing diagnosis of his own times.

5. Death as Spectacle

The present, squeezed in as it is between past and future, is always the most difficult time to understand. The past can be recalled and interpreted in hindsight, and the future can be freely imagined without one's thoughts being subject to testing. This is not the case of the present. However, this does not mean that one should refrain from diagnosing the present, but we should always be cautious not to overinterpret signs and tendencies. However, it is probably safe to say that if death in many respects disappeared during the times of modernity, being subjected to a medical regime that waged an all-our war on it, then there are signs that it has re-appeared during what sociologists often call respectively 'late-modernity', 'second modernity', 'postmodernity', 'hypermodernity', 'liquid modernity', and similar designators of our times.

Towards the end of his work, in the magnum opus *The Hour of Our Death* (Ariès 1981), Ariès suggested that something new was happening to the death mentality of the West, and perhaps, particularly in the United States. For example, he mentioned the ambition to 'humanize' death by members of the 'death awareness movement' and the hospice initiative. Ariès, however, was unsure if such developments would actually change anything significantly. As he stated: 'A heavy silence has fallen upon the subject of death. When this silence is broken, as it sometimes is in America today, it is to reduce death to the

insignificance of an ordinary event that is mentioned with feigned indifference' (Ariès 1981, p. 614). Ariès was right in observing that new winds were indeed blowing across the landscape of death, but in his lifetime, he only saw the tip of the iceberg. Drawing on his flair for naming different consecutive phases of historical development in death attitudes ('Tamed Death', 'Death of One's Own', 'Thy Death', and 'Forbidden/Invisible Death'), and inspired by amongst others the ideas of French writer Debord (Debord 1984) claiming that our society is obsessed with surfaces and consumption, it has been suggested that our contemporary death mentality is perhaps best captured by the notion of 'Spectacular Death' (Jacobsen 2016, 2020d). The whole world is now watching the same media reports and movies of dramatic—real and fictional—deaths, but most do only rarely experience death themselves. Thus, in the age of 'Spectacular Death', death is mostly present by its absence. True, there is an abundance of gory images of death, scary stories about tragic and horrible deaths, and news flashes letting us almost *feel* death, but death *as such*—death experienced first-hand—is for most people something almost unreal. Today, death as it was experienced—touched, smelled, seen, and heard—by our ancestors could not be further away from our daily lives. Death has now become a spectacle (just think of the recent video of the fatal arrest of George Floyd), something tantalizing and entertaining we observe, consume, and discard again whenever boredom sets in, until we again crave the next 'death fix'.

There are, at least, five central dimensions of this new 'Spectacular Death' that each in their way illustrates how death has become a spectacle (Jacobsen 2016). First, the 'mediation/mediatization of death' telling the story of how death today is almost exclusively something we witness as spectators from afar—through the television screens. Moreover, death is nowadays mediated by different agencies that stand between us and real death, primarily professions and the media. Previously in human history, death was directly seen, smelled, heard, and touched. There was mostly nowhere to hide from death when war, disease, or natural disaster struck. Death was then far from entertaining—it was a brutal fact of life. Now, death is staged and pre-packaged, sanitized and deodorized, and most of the mess and ugliness of death is hidden from plain sight, delegated to healthcare professionals, or is screened as entertainment in horror movies and sci-fi series (Khapaeva 2017). Second, the 'commercialization of death' referring to the fact that death is increasingly commodified and commercialized in contemporary culture. When death becomes a spectacle, it can be sold to the willing buyers whether as a part of art exhibitions, television commercials, or cultural happenings, and celebrations such as Halloween and other types of invented traditions (Berridge 2002; Khapaeva 2017). The commercialization of death is also evident in the fact that death today is something primarily being handled and processed by a funeral industry that thrives and survives on selling services and products to the bereaved but increasingly also to people who pre-plan and, more importantly, pre-pay their own last farewell. Third, following this, we find the 're-ritualization of death', capturing how the quest of modern secular society to detraditionalize life and set individuals free from the shackles of the past (Giddens 1991) has been met with a new public demand for rituals that either inscribe death in already existing cosmological or religious contexts of meaning or which make death and its celebration personally and spiritually meaningful (Lee 2008). Whether such rituals and frames of reference are traditionally religious, new age, secular, or a bricolage does not really matter—what matters is that they provide meaning, purpose and structure when individuals are overwhelmed with fear and grief. Today, far from disappearing, traditions thus persist, and they are continuously invented, rediscovered, and renewed in order to make the experience of death safer, more predictable, and more in line with popular demand. Without tradition and ritual, death is a terrifying and meaningless experience. Fourth, the 'palliative care revolution' or the 'new professionalization of death' referring to the fact that even though death is indeed increasingly medicalized and professionalized, new professions have squeezed their way into the domain of death (Jacobsen 2016). These are the professions that Ariès described above as being concerned with 'humanizing' death. At the threshold of modern society, the mortuary practices and funerary traditions of premodern society were called into question and death was increasingly inscribed in a medical context with its natural science methods, curative logic, and treatment-centered institutions. Today, in the new millennium, the modern medical monopoly

on death is increasingly challenged by the rise of the so-called 'death awareness movement' with its concomitant developments of hospice philosophy, 'death education', and palliative care practice (Jacobsen and Kearl 2011). Within these contexts, death should be understood and handled with dignity, rather than being fought and feared. Finally, the 'academic specialization of death' that has taken place particularly within the social sciences and humanities throughout the past three decades—in the wake of many of the ideas originally developed by the 'death awareness movement' in the 1960s and 1970s (Walter 2008). It is not more than a generation ago when death was certainly not a topic that would promote academic careers, attract students, or ensure research grants. To most, also within academia, death seemed a rather macabre and morbid subject matter and certainly not the stuff for serious research endeavors. Today, this situation has changed drastically. There are now academic journals dedicated to the study of death, seminars and conferences are organized on the topic, research groups and centers are founded, and modules on 'Death and Dying' are taught within disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and in some areas of medical training. Journal articles and research monographs on the subject are published also by high-profile publishing houses, and academic positions and tenure tracks are available for those specializing in this particular area. Death, in short, has become part of the curriculum.

All of these five characteristics of 'Spectacular Death' reveal that death within many areas of social life has far from disappeared but rather that it in many respects has resurfaced and experienced something of a revival and/or revolution within the last third of a century—something that has also been acknowledged by many social researchers (Jacobsen 2020c). In this way, the age of 'Spectacular Death' on the one hand inaugurates something new—a new visibility of death and a renewed interest in the topic within many different sectors—professional and non-professional—of contemporary society. Looked at from the outside, perhaps a lot of the fuss about and interest in death in contemporary society is in fact primarily driven by professionals who with the (re)discovery of death have also provided a legitimate platform for their own career pursuits, market shares, and professional agendas. On the other hand, however, there is still—perhaps particularly within the population at large—denial, distance, discomfort, and many shutters and filters in the way people meet and experience real death. To most, death is still wrapped in cling film as to avoid us from getting our hands or minds dirty from dealing with it.

From the above it is evident that in the age of 'Spectacular Death', death is perhaps no longer taboo, if it ever really was (Jacobsen 2020a). The much-cited notion of the taboo on death in modern society has perhaps always been somewhat misguided and one-dimensional (Walter 1991), and in our time it is obvious that death is *not* taboo if by this we mean that death is a no-go topic. Although there surely still is an unmistakable cultural discomfort surrounding death and an individual dread of it, we simultaneously seem to wallow in it by talking quite a lot about it and by being constantly exposed to it either as news, entertainment, social practice, treatment, or scientific knowledge. Our attitude towards death is thus never neat and clear-cut, but always contains certain inner ambivalences. In the age of 'Spectacular Death', as in the previous phases of death mentality, it is therefore not a question of taboo versus openness, denial versus acceptance, distance versus embrace, pornography versus naturalness, and so on. It is always a matter of differences in degree, and each of these experiences of and approaches to death co-exist on an extended continuum with many possible mixings and hybrids along the way. Many of the trends and tendencies in our culture of death thus parade alongside each other in a strange, often self-contradictory, symbiosis with crisis, revival, and taboo mutually co-existing (Zakowicz 2011). We need to acknowledge that the present—of life as well as of death—always presents itself to us as a welter and a mess of signs, impressions, tendencies, and relics. Trying to create a fixed and stable image of the present amounts to trying to drink a cup of coffee whist running. Something is almost bound to get spilled. This was also why G. W. F. Hegel famously reminded us that the Owl of Minerva, the harbinger of wisdom, does not spread its wings and fly until dusk. We do not know the day until it has passed—this goes for our knowledge of life as well as of death.

6. Enter Corona—On the Apparent Return of Death in Times of Uncertainty

Just as many scholars throughout the middle and latter parts of the 20th century had noticed how death was gradually disappearing from public sight, we are almost used to death being something spectacular primarily shown on the television screen or in the movies. It is not really something that concerns our lives, everyday business, or the running of society. Then, suddenly, almost out of the blue, something new and totally unexpected happened. The 'Corona Crisis' struck and spread throughout the globe in only a matter of months. Besides its immediate impact on healthcare systems and the economy, the discovery of the Corona virus also undermined our illusions that death could be suppressed and instead inaugurated a time of increased and enforced death awareness. The level of death threat instantly rose from low to sky-high. In 1915, during the first few months of World War I, the 'father of psychoanalysis' Sigmund Freud wrote the timely essay 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' (Freud 1957) dealing with how the reality of death was then suddenly making itself an urgent concern to modern civilized man [*sic*] in an unexpected and, to Freud's contemporaries, unprecedented manner. The essay is in fact a twin essay, in which the first section is devoted to describing the growing disillusion with the collapse of the *Pax Britannica* and the peaceful relationship between the nation-states of Europe. At that time, European states had co-existed in relative peace for an unparalleled period of time. It is, however, in the second part of the essay that Freud more detailed dealt with the changing relationship to death in the wake of the outbreak of the Great War. It was his contention that with the coming of a world war, whose human casualties and suffering he could not have imagined when he was writing his piece, the solid bulwark of modern society against death would collapse and expose death in a new and disturbing manner to an utterly unprepared generation—a generation that, in a historical perspective and compared to its ancestors, had gradually grown accustomed to witnessing very few deaths. In Freud's view, this meant that 'in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immorality' (Freud 1957, p. 289), whereas prehistoric man had lived side by side with death and accepted its presence. In Freud's time, we were thus out of touch with death, and only at intervals observing it as spectators. However, with the outbreak of World War I, people's ingrained belief that they were, in their unconscious, immortal, would be shattered by the sudden omnipresence of death. Freud thus insisted that the exposure to death would inaugurate a rupture in our comprehension of and approach to death in modern society.

Although there are many historical and factual differences between the outbreak of World War I and our current 'Corona Crisis', there are also some noteworthy similarities regarding how this affects our exposure to and understanding of death. At the moment, we live in a period of crisis management or what Bauman (2012) termed an 'interregnum'—a period of time squeezed in between the normality of not witnessing death very often and now being constantly confronted with news about disease, death, and dying on an unprecedented scale. On the one side, we have the certainty of the past, but ahead of us lies the uncertainty of the future. We are now standing in between, in a liminal phase characterized by confusion, crisis, and incomprehension. We think—and hope—that this interregnum will be short-lived, but in fact we cannot know. In itself, this lack of knowledge—and control—creates insecurity and uncertainty. The current 'Corona Crisis' is primarily of a viral nature and concerns public health (although there is also a financial and political aspect to all this). Previously in this millennium, we have had to manage other types of global crisis related to terrorism (9/11) and the financial breakdown in 2008. It seems as if the next crisis (of whatever kind) is waiting just around the corner and that we are increasingly living in a more or less permanent state of emergency. The Corona virus pandemic has—within a few months—transformed our lives and impacted the way death is now part of our thoughts and actions.

During World War I when Freud was contemplating the consequences of the coming confrontation with mass death, there was only little political concern for the potential human casualties. It was generally accepted that soldiers would go to war and die on the battlefield or in the trenches. This was their duty and there was a war to be won. During the first day of the battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916, more than 60,000 were killed in combat. This astounding number is well above the total number of

human casualties of the Corona virus in any European country by the time of writing these lines—after five months of the 'Corona Crisis' (with approximately 8500 confirmed global deaths in one day as the highest number so far). Also, World War II witnessed the almost unimaginable loss of human life through acts of war or the organized mass murder of civilians. The difference between these historical events and the current situation is that the casualties are now no longer conscripted soldiers but civilians, ordinary people not involved in any type of warfare and not defined as enemies by any war party. We have not been accustomed, as were previous generations, to innocent civilian death on such a grand scale. True, in recent decades we have seen plenty of terrorist attacks killing people indiscriminately—almost to the extent that we have become eerily immune to it. However, the main difference between these terrorist attacks and the Corona virus is that we now feel that someone should be able to prevent it, cure it, contain it, and make it go away again (that 'someone' being science and the healthcare system). Moreover, in the current scenario, there is no culprit to blame and thus no one to condemn and punish. In addition to this, our whole approach to the fact that people die from war or disease has changed considerably since we were sending soldiers to their deaths in the world wars. The cost of saving a single human life from the Corona virus is now higher than at any other time in human history. Previously, people would also die from diseases and epidemics, but nowadays, we will do almost everything to prevent unnecessary deaths through extremely expensive medical intervention. This is probably also the reason that we are now so obsessed with counting death numbers and with comparing one country to another—it is daily 'Breaking News' that we can digest while having breakfast. Moreover, it is presented almost as if there is a war to be won.

According to American sociologists Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (Glaser and Strauss 1965), there are many different 'awareness contexts' that frame, circumscribe, and direct our actions, thoughts, and feelings in relation to death. In their microsociological study of American hospital settings from the mid-1960s, they found that the so-called 'closed awareness context' was quite prominent—an archetypical modern way of dealing with death that pushed it into denial and silence. Besides this, they also coined the terms: The 'mutual pretense context', the 'suspicion context', and the 'open awareness context'—the latter becoming the hallmark of the hospice movement's attempt to humanize death and to treat 'death with dignity'. If we apply Glaser and Strauss' concept of 'awareness context' to contemporary society—and to a more macrosociological scale—our collective death awareness context also changes, and indeed quite quickly during these weeks and months. One might describe it as the sudden awakening of a slumbering awareness of death. Not so very long ago, the fear of a global pandemic potentially killing hundreds of thousands of people was not very prevalent among most decision-makers or ordinary people. We may now say that we have moved from an 'unconcerned awareness context' of death on a global scale to a state of alert or a 'panicky awareness context'. This move has been painful and costly. Death is suddenly something that we, all of us, need to concern ourselves with. Never before in human history have so many resources—political, medical, financial, and military—been allocated and used so quickly in order to counter our fear of large-scale death as today. This testifies to how much our awareness of death has suddenly been raised. As was fictionally described with such great insight in American writer Don DeLillo's dystopian novel *White Noise* (DeLillo 2011), there is in contemporary society an extraordinary fear of and alertness to disaster (and death) and the cure is that of creating ever more security measures, a medicalization of everything, and a blind belief in science and technology as our ultimate saviors. The fear of death according to DeLillo is thus always there beneath the surface of apparent tranquility and happiness, just waiting to erupt through the thin surface whenever we least expect it (Jacobsen and Runge 2020). In short, our ingrained sense of security, certainty, and immortality has been rocked by the 'Corona Crisis'.

We may also try to understand our changed contemporary attitude towards death by applying British sociologist Walter (2019) useful conceptualization of the 'pervasive dead' as opposed to the 'separated dead' of modern times. Modernity, as we saw earlier, sought to sequester and sever the ties to the dead and remove them from the domain of the living. The dead were to take no part in the social life of the living, and we had to let them go. Contrary to this, in the wake of the aforementioned

'palliative care revolution', we are now increasingly encouraged to live with our dead, not least through the lengthy grieving processes and the need for continuing emotional bonds to the deceased. The dead are thus still with us and we publicly express and share our experiences and feelings of loss on the internet with our families, friends, and followers. However, with the coming of Corona times, the dead are now pervasive in a new sense: Through the ceaseless talk and communication about the daily death toll, precautionary measures, and how to try to avoid dying from the virus like those less fortunate. The constant exposure through the media to the 'Corona Crisis'—in press conferences, news flashes, and documentaries—and the mentioning of its thousands of victims has awakened the unpleasant awareness that death has not disappeared and that we may ourselves, if we are not cautious, end up dying from this virus. Yet, in a strange sense, it all seems to be happening to someone else. Even though the death tolls are high in certain parts of the world (much higher than with the recent SARS, MERS, and Ebola epidemics), most of us do not know any casualties of the Corona virus, whereas most people during earlier pandemics in the 20th century such as The Spanish Flu or the Cholera epidemic would have known someone being either seriously ill or having died from the disease. In this way, the Corona virus is certainly there, but to most of us it is an almost phantasmagorical phenomenon.

Now, the whole world is watching as the 'Corona Crisis' unfolds. We are witnessing it all from the safety of our sofas and living room chairs while country after country declares a state of emergency and commences the fight against this new invisible enemy. We watch how Italian military convoys remove coffins containing the Corona dead in the dead of night, we are shown numerous caskets lined up in a Spanish church prepared for a mass funeral ceremony, and we see mass graves on an island close to New York City filling up with the corpses of those who need to be buried quickly and who cannot afford other burial options. We are daily shown statistics, models, graphs, and tables counting the dead, the infected, and the seriously ill requiring intensive care. This is indeed a new type of 'death pornography' than the one described earlier by Gorer (1955). In his thought-provoking and much-cited essay, Gorer claimed that death in modern society had replaced sex as the latest taboo. He observed how death was now shrouded in the same prudery as that of birth and copulation in the 19th century (see also Tercier 2013). Obviously, we still have the old conventional death pornography from the world of fiction attracting audiences to images of decaying bodies, depictions of the living dead, and horrific murder stories (Jacobsen 2020b). However, the new pornography of death as is evident in the 'Corona Crisis' is much more sterile and clinical—death as such is not seen, but we read score charts of deaths, learn about deadly chains of contagion, and are informed about how to avoid catching 'the Virus'. We are *told about* death, but we do not *see* it. Just as French sociologist Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1995) once suggested that the Gulf War did not take place, partly because we in the Western world always witnessed the actual war actions from afar on the television in the shape of images of bombs dropped from high altitudes and hitting their anonymous targets or through statistics of casualties, tactical charts of troop movements, and expert commentaries, so we might also provocatively claim that the Corona crisis does not really happed. In a roundabout way, death is there, but it is not visible besides from the daily charts and tables showing the numbers of dead but anonymous people.

In the current 'Corona Crisis', we are thus primarily exposed to *the possibility of death*, not to the actual pain, suffering, and agony that *real death* entails. Moreover, we are exempted from the smell, noise, sight, and unpleasantness of being close to real death as our ancestors have been for thousands of years. We never really see its ugly face—we do not see the dying, the dead, or the mourners. Due to the fear of viral spread, the dead can only be buried in a hurried manner and the funeral ceremonies are kept to a bare minimum. The 'Corona Crisis' is in many respects not unlike a televised medical drama. We are told about the 'heroics' of those working in hospitals and there is mentioning of 'victims', but we do not hear about their suffering or deaths as such. Strangely, we are unaccustomed to talking about people dying from kidney failure, heart problems or lung disease as 'victims' and those taking care of them—as their professional line of work—as 'heroes'. It seems as if we need this new medical drama to make sense of it all—and to create distance. Corona death is something managed and processed by healthcare professionals dressed in virus protection outfits (not unlike the

'Mylex suits' in DeLillo's aforementioned book), we discuss medicalized issues relating to the disease (symptoms, pathways to infection, immunity, vaccines, and protective measures) and our exposure to those who are seriously ill or who have already died is severely limited. In this way, the handling of the Corona virus is very much an example of a modern monopolizing strategy of death by various 'expert systems' as British sociologist Giddens (1991) once called it with each their areas of expertise, each their terminology and each their agendas. Looking at who have been the prominent voices on the 'Corona Crisis' in the media, sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, or anthropologists have hardly had a say. Instead, the center stage has been crowded with 'natural scientists' such as virologists, microbiologists, biomedical researchers, epidemiologists, serologists, and other professionals working in state-sponsored or private agencies or by bureaucrats radiating uncontradicted authority. Priests and grief counsellors are almost hardly ever interviewed or mentioned, although they perform a crucial role in the dying process, in its ceremonial marking, and its emotional resolution. Corona death is thus a paradigmatic example of the thoroughly mediatized and medicalized nature of death in our society.

The current 'Corona Crisis' raises a number of medical, social, and ethical issues relating to death. Leaving aside the medical issues, some of which we have already touched upon above, the arrival of 'the Virus' also begets questions such as for whom we should care, how much should saving a life cost society, how are we to treat other people, how do we ourselves survive the Corona scare, and so on. On the overall, the 'Corona Crisis' has worked as a social solvent making us increasingly suspicious about other people's motives and behavior. It is now 'us' versus 'them'. 'They' are regarded as 'hoarders' or as irresponsible individuals not keeping the required distance—in either way, as someone concerned only with their own self-interest. At the same time, we are told to avoid contact with others, cough into the crook of our elbows, and continuously wash and rub our hands with hand sanitizers if we want to stay safe—and alive. As mentioned earlier, in our society, children have increasingly become unaccustomed to the terrifying reality of death, shielded by well-meaning parents who themselves find the prospect of death unpleasant and unimaginable. However, the new potential for Corona death is now something children in kindergartens and schools learn about, and they are advised—by their parents and pedagogues—to keep a safe 'social distance' to their friends and playmates. In many ways, this is not all that different from the way schoolchildren during the Cold War were trained to take shelter below their desks if a nuclear attack should suddenly occur. Bauman (1992b) once suggested that the preferred survival strategy of our times is 'self-care' whereby he referred to a concern with bodily fitness and outliving others living unhealthy lives. Now, the notion of 'self-care' acquires a new meaning when the most important survival strategy is to avoid 'the Virus' and henceforth 'other people'. We thus enter a survival mode in which other people are regarded as lepers, threats, potential carriers of disease, the personifications of viral death. We need to stay away from them, avoid contact, and use detergents, hand rubbing alcohol, medical mouth bands, or other remedies in order to make sure that we do not contract a potentially deadly disease from 'them'. Although the 'Corona Crisis' concerns us all, and although the crisis has also many places revealed a new spirit of community and togetherness, there is still an element of antagonism involved. 'We' want to survive, and anyone standing in the way of this objective is seen as a public enemy. Survival becomes our utmost concern—and in this roundabout way, death is through its absence with us once again.

7. Conclusions

This article has attempted to develop a sketchy diagnosis of death in our time, particularly as seen in the light of the present 'Corona Crisis' and its ground-breaking impact on our current awareness of and exposure to death—and also on our way of life in general. In order to understand our present, we ventured into a compact recapitulation of the way in which our attitude towards death had changed throughout 1000 years. Obviously, the historical sketch provided here is far from exhaustive of the many different ways in which humans have dealt with or thought about death throughout traditional and modern history and neither is it a sufficient testimony of the way we confront and think about death now. We have here only scratched the surface by presenting some cultural and historical caricatures

of much more diversified and complex practices and attitudes, and in this way, we have erected an admittedly shaky analytical scaffold with which to shore up our diagnosis of the present.

In the article, we have tried to document a historical transformation from a time when death was omnipresent (traditional society) through a time when death (almost) disappeared (modern society) to a time when death presumably has resurfaced (contemporary society). Today, with the arrival of the 'Corona Crisis', death is perhaps not as *omnipresent* as it was in medieval times, but it seems as if it is *omnipotent*—we will nowadays go a very long way in order to reduce death numbers and saving lives (much further than at any other historical time). We now fight death more incessantly than ever before and somehow still seem to believe that death (or at least the causes of death) may perhaps be done away with if enough ingenuity and perseverance is put into it. Death is indeed still the last enemy and even though we have not gotten any closer to victory, we nevertheless vehemently carry on—in vain—with combating death by all available means.

The revolution in death attitudes that the Western world witnessed—at least according to prominent interpreters such as Philippe Ariès—around the turn of the 19th century, is perhaps in contemporary society matched by the unexpected and brutal arrival of the 'Corona Crisis'. Ariès, and with him also Sigmund Freud and Geoffrey Gorer, particularly referred to the advent of World War I and its unimaginable suffering, mass death, and mass mourning as one of the main events in this early 20th century revolution in death attitudes. Millions upon millions were killed on the battlefields and mourned during those five years of madness. Death was everywhere. Even though we do perhaps not witness death directly during the current 'Corona Crisis', we are still constantly made aware that death is now a part of life, and that we should be careful to abide by the rules and regulations in order to avoid contagion and potential death. Although we do perhaps not *see* death, we *hear* and *talk* about it incessantly through the many measures, precautionary steps, and endless press announcements by politicians and healthcare experts, and we *think* about the possibility of death when we plan our daily doings and lie in bed at night.

The current 'Corona Crisis' has shown us that unexpected events can indeed have a tremendous and instantaneous impact on our awareness of and attitude towards death. Death suddenly becomes real, dangerous, part of life. However, on the other hand, the 'Corona Crisis' has also emphasized—as was signaled above with the notion of 'Spectacular Death'—that death nowadays remains something we mostly witness at a safe distance, not something that we really experience or as our ancestors get acquainted with. To them, death was familiar; to us, it is still a faceless stranger hiding behind the anonymous names of Corona virus, cancer, or other deadly diseases. Due to the 'Corona Crisis', we now live in precarious and precautionary times. We are still waiting to see if a consequence of these turbulent times is that the modern quest for utopia and the creation of a better future for all is being reversed into a preoccupation with 'retrotopia' and a return to times seemingly less troubled, uncertain, and insecure (Bauman 2017). If we were successful in trying to return to the apparent splendors of yore, it might perhaps also prove to be a golden opportunity to consider rediscovering the ways of life that previously made it possible for us to live more peacefully with death.

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